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CENTRALIZED LABOR RESPONSIBILITY FROM A LABOR UNION STANDPOINT

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Centralized labor responsibility means the creation of a new department in the management of plants, the function of which shall be the control of recruiting, retention and discharge of the working force. Judged by its title, this article assumes to state the attitude of trade unionism toward this innovation, when in fact trade unionism as yet has no attitude. The thing is too new, and, so far as I know, no contact has yet been established old enough and wide enough to permit or compel consideration and valuation by official trade unionism.

Nor have I had such personal experience with the practical workings of centralized employment departments as would qualify me to speak with the assurance that attends knowledge. What I have to offer, then, is the reaction of one union man to a new theory of management as applied to the human element in industry, and which may or may not be a correct forecast of a collective sentiment which has not even commenced to form.

So regarded, it is not pure presumption on my part to set myself up as a spokesman for organized labor. For thirty-five years I have been a member of the union in my own craft, active in its councils, and interested in everything that pertained to the general labor union movement. I have worked with union men in the shop and worked for them as their representative. What I shall say here expresses my own views, but this long acquaintance with the movement and the people in it may give those views a measure of value as interpreting the probable reaction of others.

CAUSES OF LABOR TURNOVER

In the scale of prices of Typographical Union No. 6, there is a provision that no man shall be paid for less than a day's work even though he is hired for less than a day. In the philosophy underlying this legislation will be found the most prolific of the many causes

which contribute to excessive labor turnover. The workman is regarded as an easily replaceable tool of production whom it is a loss to retain a minute longer than he can be employed at full capacity. Unlike inanimate tools of production, he represents no investment. Hence the tendency to make his term of employment for minutes only, if that suits the convenience of the employer, and the counter-acting tendency of the union to set up at least the pitiful limit of one day as a minimum of permanence. Thus studied, this little rule which takes up two lines in the scale book is a brilliant illumination of industrial history. It contrasts the relative values placed on things and men.

One might mention many causes of excessive labor turnover, but if they were analyzed, they would, in the main, finally resolve themselves into that same fundamental one—that workpeople are regarded, not as human beings, but as animated tools of production, which can be temporarily used upon payment of an agreed sum.

Human thought has a way of seeking concrete expression through a personality or a thing rather than by means of an intangible principle. So, when one is asked to name the chief cause of bedevilment in handling labor supply, at once there leaps into mind the figure of the foreman—the living, obvious doer of the harm so clearly recognized. He wields despotic authority, seemingly without check from any power in the heavens above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth. Yet he is not selected because he is fit to possess such arbitrary power over a limited number of his fellow-men. He is chargeable with much evil doing on his own account, and occasionally may be credited with humane instincts that make for amelioration. But in reality he is only a pawn, the screen for those who prod him from above. He is permitted despotic power over the detail of who shall work, but he is only a puppet as to the policy which controls the workers. To take from a number of foremen the power now given them, and to centralize that power in a single person, without at the same time entirely transforming the spirit that actuates the mechanism, may abolish some of the grosser evils, but will leave the main cause of excessive labor turnover untouched.

These grosser evils are serious enough. They engender toadyism and bribery on one side, favoritism and oppression on the other. The manhood of men and the chastity of women are frequent offer-

ings at the feet of a little tin god whose favor must be won or his malevolence placated. That is the sort of creature the foreman can be when the employer will not check him and the workpeople cannot. When a union enters upon the scene, flagrant abuse of authority in the matter of discharge may lead either to justice done or an explosion; but motives of choice in hiring are too subtly concealed to admit of effective regulation. Unions have found it necessary to legislate for the punishment of members who use unfair means of obtaining employment, but proof is difficult and prosecutions are rare.

Naturally, because of his great powers, the foreman is a subject of union law making, not in his capacity as an overseer of production, but in his function as the arbiter of employment. Most unions will not permit him to be a member; the International Typographical Union compels him to be one. Yet, because he is the lowest officer in the executive scale the outcome of the legislation is unsatisfactory; he can make trouble, but he cannot allay it. Therefore, so far as existing union laws treat of the foreman in relation to employment, I would expect no objection to their amendment or repeal whenever a new system makes them obsolete.

The influence of seasonal production on labor turnover needs but to be mentioned rather than elaborated on in this short paper. Its causes and possible remedies are far outside of the immediate sphere of the employment manager. A volume would scarcely suffice for the consideration of this one phase of the employment problem. The same may be said of such potent factors as the condition of trade and demand or lack of demand for labor.

Among minor causes of excessive labor turnover is a sort of restlessness which is most frequently manifested by the more competent mechanics. A job may be satisfactory in every respect, quite as good as they are likely to find anywhere, and yet they will leave because they do not want to remain in one shop too long. Perhaps they are themselves unable clearly to define their reasons, but, so well as I am able to interpret the psychology of this desire for change, it rests upon a fear of losing their independence, of getting into a frame of mind wherein they will come to attach disproportionate importance to the retention of a certain job. There is some basis of fact for this idea, for I have known men who have worked in a shop for a long period whose overhanging nightmare is the fear of

losing the job. Long service made them uneasy instead of giving a sense of security.

THE UNION ATTITUDE TOWARD LABOR BUREAUS

Traditional methods of hiring and discharge are so prolific of all-around dissatisfaction that any new method which is based on study of the problem, and can reasonably be expected to improve conditions, will start with a tremendous presumption in its favor. It would be hard to devise a worse system than the one we now have. Opportunity to work is the primal necessity for nearly all of us, and this opportunity we must seek through such means as are available. Even the strongest unions have been able to accomplish little in the way of improvement. Their members are not so entirely at the mercy of caprice or vindictiveness, and are much less subject to unfair competition between seekers for employment than are the unorganized, but they are by no means free of these evil influences.

There comes now a proposal to lift this matter of prime importance out of the slough of neglect in which it has lain, and to give it the dignity and thought which were always its due. The proposal comes from the right quarter—the highest; and its essence is to put it in the right place—the highest. The purchase of human labor is to be considered as carefully as the purchase of equipment and supplies, as carefully as selling and financing. The officer in charge is not to be a mere understrapper, working his sweet will in irresponsible despotism, but one broadly clothed with power and its attendant responsibility. The motive is the best business motive in the world—enlightened selfishness. It has been discovered that former methods are wasteful and relatively unproductive; that judgment in hiring, and a great deal more judgment in keeping employes when hired, is a paying proposition; it breeds dividends both of money and good feeling.

How will union men receive such a proposal? Why, just as all other working-men will receive it. It is a rightful but long delayed tribute to the worth and dignity of labor. It is progress like that which gave labor a place in the cabinet of the President of the United States. It means that in the cabinet of every business chief there is a man who speaks for people, as contrasted with those who speak for things.

Therefore, such a proposal should inevitably and triumphantly

establish itself. But soft! The proposal is good in itself, but let us see how and by whom it is going to be worked out.

Recently I read an article on the work of a woman who is at the head of the employment bureau of a large corporation. It appears that among her desirable qualifications for the position is the ability to smell out agitators, and not the least of her achievements is her notable success in keeping that pestiferous species out of the plant. That illuminating bit of information gave me pause. Remember, I have been asked to say how *union men* would regard centralized labor responsibility. Well, I am a union man and I have an uneasy feeling that I would correspond rather closely to her idea of an agitator. If there were a union of the industry carried on in that shop, I would join it. If there were none, but a movement started to create one, I would be mixed up in it. Very likely I would be the prime mover. If all the justice and sweet reasonableness called for in the prospectus were not on tap, I might rise and say so. I have an ineradicable notion that workpeople are entitled to a voice in the making of wage scales, fixing the length of the workday, and other important incidents affecting employment, and that no amount of kindly welfare work, no benefits of any sort flowing from a benevolent despotism which arrogates to itself entire jurisdiction over such matters, can compensate for the deprivation of this inherent right. Still less so when the despotism is not benevolent.

Now, if that clever lady found out that my brain harbored such pernicious ideas, I would be refused work in that shop. And if other union men were barred for similar reasons, the impression would probably gain ground among them that, so far as they were concerned, the new method was no better than the old. They could enter that shop only by surrendering their right of association. The new idea, so promising in itself, would meet with hostility from union men.

So far as I am aware, departments of labor such as we are considering have not yet been established in industries where the employes are organized. When they are introduced into industries which are unorganized, the question of the attitude of union men will remain an academic one for such industries. When they are brought into industries which are strongly organized, there is little doubt that the managements will take the union into their confidence and endeavor to show it the mutual advantages that will flow

from the new plan. But when such a department is established in an industry where a union exists, but is struggling for a foothold, where it has not yet secured recognition and is conscious that its fate still hangs in the balance, then the new departure will be looked at with suspicion. Its very centralization will be regarded as an additional means of exercising discrimination against union members, and if that discrimination makes itself apparent as in the instance cited, it needs no conjurer to foresee the attitude of that union to that department of labor.

And why not? Here is a promise made to the ear and its fulfillment almost immediately broken to the hope. Union men believe that their interests are mutual, and are best cared for by association and collective action. That is the lesson of their experience. But if this new dispensation, like the old, denies them this right, and demands that they rely on the newly awakened good-will of the employer, both parties being fully aware of the impotence of the individual workman, why should they discard the lesson of their experience?

ACTUAL METHODS OF HANDLING LABOR TURNOVER

In all the literature that has thus far come under my notice relating to centralized labor bureaus, I find a very satisfactory realization of the facts that good pay, fair treatment and an earnest desire to retain, if possible, a person once hired are potent means toward the reduction of labor turnover. Discharge is verily looked upon as a last resort when all efforts to make the worker fit in somewhere have failed. And since the reduction of labor turnover is the avowed object of the new department, these are the natural lines for it to take.

Again let us examine the means whereby these objects are to be accomplished. It is clear that if the labor department is to succeed, it must have some voice—perhaps a controlling voice—in every matter that affects the human equipment of the plant. The employment bureaus described in magazine articles claim such powers, but in my work in the public employment bureau I did not find it so. I recall four such employment managers who told me that they had nothing to do with fixing pay; that they tried to find suitable men, and then sent them up for an interview with the foreman to make the best bargain they could. Except that the applicant had

one more hurdle to jump on his way to a job, I cannot see that these four plants had improved anything in this particular.

But let us get back to this point as it directly affects the union attitude, and we will take the best examples. Our enlightened employment manager has his say in the making of rates. But unions also want a voice on that subject. If the rates offered equal or exceed the scale made by the union, no question can arise. But suppose the rates offered are lower than the union minimum, or so arranged that they may be higher or lower, and the union has not been consulted about them and will not be. We get right back to a familiar bone of contention, and in that case the union attitude to that shop remains unchanged. The fact that the employment manager instead of the foreman announces to the applicant how much he is to be paid for his work has not altered the situation at all.

We now pass on to the adjudication of grievances. Many sincere employers and managers have assured me that they are always willing to hear and adjust the grievances of their workpeople. I do not bring their good faith into question, but I have a fairly thorough knowledge of human nature as it is exhibited in the shop. Shall I tell you the fundamental reason for the existence of the labor leader? It is that the workman may have a spokesman who is economically independent of the employer, and who can therefore meet the latter on equal terms. When the livelihood of the man who speaks for himself or his fellows is dependent on the good-will of the man he faces, it requires courage to accept the mission and still more courage to speak with frankness and contend with determination for the side he represents. Not many employers are spiritually big enough to forget or waive the power they possess; and even though they may be, the man who treats with them has no assurance of it. Hence there is a silent but active intimidating force exerting its tremendous pressure on the workman, and only the exceptional man can disregard its promptings.

The thing takes on a different aspect, however, when an executive officer of the union appears to discuss matters on behalf of the men. Not without reason do employers resent what is termed the "unwarranted interference of outsiders," but the ostensible reason for resentment does not even remotely resemble the true one.

Although the employer himself may be a man of big caliber, able to forego the power of terrorism he possesses, there are under-

lings who are not. Their memories are long, their vindictiveness unbounded. No man can so order his conduct as to entirely avoid giving the colorable opportunity the foreman may be seeking. So in this respect, where the union has no standing, its attitude in each instance will be determined by events. *Ad interim* it will be a case of "show me."

The way discharges are handled in the magazine stories already mentioned is not the way the thing is done in the few plants having employment managers with which I have had some contact. But we will agree that such plants have taken the form of a good thing without the substance. Different unions have their various methods of protecting their members against unjust discharge. Typographical Union No. 6 has worked out an excellent system, whereby questionable discharges are submitted to a mixed tribunal of employers and employes, whose decision is final. The union wins nearly all the cases, thus demonstrating the need of a power of review over the discharging authority. It also shows that when the union has a reasonable opportunity of preserving the rights of its members, it will also use discrimination, and will not press unreasonable claims, or can be effectively checked if it does. Where a union is recognized, its procedures are of course followed.

There can be no question, however, that union men, just like other men, will cordially respond when they see that the management of a plant, upon its own initiative, seeks to do exact justice in this important regard. And though they may be sceptical at first, continued well-doing must convince them of the sincerity of the desire. By the glow of gratification I got in reading about it, I gauge their feelings on seeing it. If employers had always treated their people justly there never would have been any unions. If they learn to do so in the future the need for them may be less urgent. But we won't disband yet.

THE EXTENT OF UNION APPROVAL

Is there anything in the effort to reduce labor turnover which cannot be approved by a broad-minded union man? The answer is, yes; but this requires elucidation. If the desired result is attained, that fact in itself is proof that the people working in that plant are at least sufficiently well treated to be willing to remain. A management enlightened enough to concern itself about the matter,

and more or less successful in accomplishment, deserves its meed of approval.

Suppose the company inaugurates or continues a policy of opposition to organization? Suppose its hostility goes to the length of excluding union men from the shop if they are known to be such, or discharging them if they join? Even then approval should not be withheld, nor would it be. Men may be opponents and yet find ground for mutual respect.

But there are degrees of approval. The broad-minded union man rejoices at any betterment in the condition of those who labor, whether obtained by their own efforts and conceded as their right, or granted as a measure of expediency, perhaps partly as an insurance against organization. But for himself he certainly would resent the espionage, in the form of solicitude for his welfare, which appears to be an invariable component of the systems to which publicity has been given. To be completely accompanied in his goings out and his comings in, his leisure regulated, his amusements selected, his wages apportioned—these are extensions of his employer's contact which he would not submit to himself and cannot approve for others. When he acknowledges both the good intentions and the good results that have flowed from this new conception of management, he has not surrendered his conviction that as a seller of his labor he is entitled to be heard in the determination of the terms upon which it shall be sold; he has not receded from the lesson of his experience that the only way he can make himself heard is by association with his fellows. Nor does he admit that the buyer of his labor bought also a regulatory interest in his life.

Let me pose as that broad-minded union man, which of course is what I have been doing all the time, and quote a part of a letter recently written by me to a prominent manufacturer in the Middle West, a letter that summarizes my position on this point:

The evident praiseworthy feature of your work is that you are giving serious attention to the question of human relationships in industry. No matter how much I may disagree with your idea that you have found the road to industrial democracy in your shop, or what objections there may be to your methods, recognition is still due of the fact that you are apparently making a conscientious effort. There is a standard of right doing to which you are striving to conform. Neither can it be denied that people working under the conditions you describe are better off than those employed where nothing else is ever considered than how much can be obtained for how little. But when this is conceded, it is not thereby conceded that industrial democracy is established.

You say that your work is not to be confounded with that which is usually called welfare work, yet welfare work is strongly suggested as I read your various addresses. You are still the benevolent despot and nothing more, so far as I can see. Personally I would resent some of the things you say you do. Your employment department would find me out of harmony with the organization, I very much fear, unless I successfully dissembled my real feelings, which would not be good for you or for me. There are lots of people who no doubt accept what you do complacently, since it is done for their benefit. The same kind of people stolidly endure worse treatment, up to the point of desperation, if that is the only way to earn their bread. But the difference between the two kinds of employers is the same as that between the benevolent and the cruel despot.

I believe I have accurately forecasted the union attitude in this regard. I believe also that the union can afford to wait. Liberty is an imperishable desire of the human heart, and will surely assert itself even among the most submissive. That no man is good enough to rule another man without his consent is an industrial as well as a political truth. To impose such rule as a condition precedent to an opportunity to earn the means of life is not consent.

Also I believe that attempts at regulation which intrude themselves into the private life of the workman must inevitably breed hypocrisy and deceit before they finally foment rebellion. If explanations are necessary of certain acts, they will be manufactured; if vouchers of expenditure are required, means will be found to produce them. To guard against such impositions there springs into being a sort of "Third Section," a secret police. To call these agents "advisors" or "investigators" is but to give a euphonious name to an ugly practice.

FAIR DEALING AND SYMPATHY FUNDAMENTAL

I have already referred to certain establishments which have possessed themselves of employment managers and with which the Public Employment Bureau has had business relations. I do not know the methods used nor the extent of the powers delegated, but I have had some glimpses of the results. They were slaughter houses before; they are slaughter houses still. The employment managers have not even succeeded in stabilizing their own jobs. Inside of six months two of them were tumbled off their thrones and themselves became applicants for employment at the bureau. The reasons were obvious. Working conditions were bad in every one of the essentials. People sent to them at their request were not even sure of an interview.

If illustration were needed, these examples prove that mere centralization has no beneficial influence on labor turnover. Any scheme is useless which has not for its basis fair dealing and decent treatment, while even in the absence of a more or less elaborate plan, remarkable results can be attained if they are employed. I worked fifteen years in a composing room where the permanent force was about 100, and it was marvelous how the years rolled by with hardly ever a change unless death made it. A fellow felt as if he were only a newcomer when he had but a beggarly ten years or so behind him. There was no deliberate planning to that end, but the employment manager who could show equivalent results would be in line for a yellow jacket and a peacock's feather.

Then comes the personal equation. The man or woman competent to do this work must of necessity be big—very big. Sympathy with and comprehension of people is the first thing he needs—and the second, and the third. If he has these he is qualified and experience will supply all minor details of expertness; without them he may have every little nicety of technique, but he will accomplish no more than is forced upon people by their necessities. I have a man in mind as I write this.

Speaking generally, it has been thrust upon my notice that the quarters where the question of employment stabilization has received most serious attention are also the quarters where a flaming sword bars the entrance of the union. The occasional individual may come in, but he must be quiet. He is always on sufferance. Very well; so be it. Often enough employers who conduct non-union shops are far above union employers in every humane attribute. Therefore we will acknowledge that which is good, respect them for doing it, and fight them till time ends on the issue of man's right to unite with his fellow-man against the bondage imposed by his individual helplessness. Yea, though we are bound by a silken rope instead of an iron chain, yet will we not endure it. But whenever they shall recognize our vital interest and our equal right in the working out of these momentous things by which our lives are made or marred, then will they always find us ready to meet them. Then will they have turned their faces toward industrial democracy.